This factsheet summarises current research in relation to the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) population of Northern Ireland.

### Key facts

- LGBT young people are less likely to discuss their sexuality within the family.
- Those with a Christian ethos are more likely to disapprove of LGBT people.
- LGBT people in Northern Ireland are more likely to have experienced harassment than their counterparts in the rest of the UK and Ireland.

### LGBT people and family relationships

Although the LGBT population in Northern Ireland is now more visible than it has ever been, research published by the Northern Ireland Human Rights Commission (NIHRC) found that “young LGB people experience isolation within society and sometimes within their families”.¹

Research carried out by Jarman and Tennant in 2003 also found that gay respondents were more likely than heterosexuals to report that they felt they had to keep their sexual feelings secret.²

The Towards better sexual health survey published by FPA in 2002 surveyed 1,000 young people aged 14-25 years (heterosexual and LGB) and found that respondents who identified themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual were less likely to report having a close personal relationship with their parents. These same respondents were also less likely to be able to discuss personal or sexual matters with their parents, and less likely to have received relevant sex information at home.³

Although the research concluded that there was no quantifiable evidence that the sexual orientation of LGBT young people affected their levels of confidence and happiness, and their ability to cope with problems, there was nevertheless some evidence that homosexuality and bisexuality affects the family atmosphere and relationships.

In 2003, Youthnet surveyed 362 young people under the age of 25 who identified as LGBT.⁴ The survey found that almost three quarters of all respondents had experienced homophobic attitudes from family members. As a result, they felt compelled to leave the family home and 16% said they had experienced homelessness.

### Access to healthcare services

The Institute for Conflict Research produced a report examining healthcare issues for transgender people resident in Northern Ireland which highlighted social factors impacting on transgender individuals’ sense of well-being and their experiences of healthcare services provision⁵. The findings were collected through a series of interviews and focus groups with members of the transgender community and health professionals that work with transgender service users.

The report found that a number of respondents reported experiences of inappropriate and prejudicial treatment when accessing some healthcare services, such as healthcare staff: using inappropriate pronouns; using and displaying old names in front of other patients; offering inappropriate services; providing inaccurate advice; and refusing service provision. Such experiences heightened respondents’ emotional vulnerability and delayed access to
appropriate support. Some respondents reported positive experiences of good working practice including healthcare staff: asking service users their preferred pronoun; using service users’ preferred name; seeking accurate information of where to signpost service users to; and not letting personal views or beliefs prevent them from their duty of care.

The majority of respondents who attended the Gender Identity Clinic (based in the greater Belfast area) were satisfied with the services provided, finding them to be timely and person centred. However, some respondents were unhappy with the limited number of staff and the difficulties in accessing the service for those who live outside the greater Belfast area.

The report made a number of recommendations, including:

- Equality and diversity training on gender identity issues for existing health professionals
- Increased funding for the Gender Identity Clinic
- The DHSSPS to develop a comprehensive service framework for gender variant children and transgender youth.

**Homophobia**

The Towards better sexual health survey concluded that many young people are disapproving of those who choose a LGB lifestyle. Key findings of that survey include the following:

- Over half the respondents said that sex between men is always or mostly wrong. Over one third of respondents said that sex between women is always or mostly wrong.
- Respondents not affiliated to any of the major Christian churches held more liberal views about sexual orientation. Protestants were most likely to disapprove of sex between women and between men.
- Most young men disapproved of sex between men but only a minority of young men disapproved of sex between women.
- 16% of male respondents who reported having had homosexual sex said that sex between two men is always wrong, with another 8% saying that it is sometimes wrong.
- The figures for young women are similar. Of the young women who reported having had sex with another female on at least one occasion, 15.4% said that sex between two women is always or sometimes wrong.3

The disparity between the attitudes and the actual behaviour of those young men and women may have severe implications for their sexual health and personality development. This was confirmed by NIHRC research, which found that when accessing healthcare services, young people are often exposed to prejudices, human rights abuses and a lack of structures tailored to their needs.1

**Homophobia at school**

A report carried out by the Rainbow Project and Cara-Friend demonstrates that homophobia exists at school. The report focused on the experiences of lesbian, gay and bisexual people (LGB) at school and looked at bullying, the Northern Ireland curriculum, the role of teachers and the education structures of Northern Ireland, and highlighted a number of inequalities.

As part of the report, an anonymous online survey was conducted, where 133 LGB young people aged between 15 and 25 responded. Key findings include:
• Homophobic language and bullying are prevalent in schools with 98% of LGB young people reporting hearing homophobic language from pupils, teachers, non-teaching staff and visitors to schools.
• 69% of respondents reported that teachers ignored homophobic language.
• 75% of LGB young people did not report incidents of bullying and harassment to school authorities. The most frequently cited reason was that they thought that the school would not take it seriously (43%).
• 94% of respondents reported that they were taught nothing in sexual health education which was relevant to them as an LGB person.

The report made a number of recommendations, including:

• The introduction of a complaints mechanism for young people and their families to bring complaints against schools which have not responded to incidents of homophobic bullying.
• All schools should have a comprehensive policy tackling homophobic bullying within a school setting. 6

Challenging homophobia should be an integral element of a school's relationships and sexuality education programme, particularly when Youthnet's research found that 44% of LGB young people were bullied at school because of their sexuality, and 69% of LGB young people who left school earlier than they would have preferred were also bullied.4 Yet ACCORD's research, carried out in post-primary Catholic schools in Northern Ireland, found that 68% of respondents had not discussed homosexuality or were unsure whether it had been discussed, and 83% had not discussed bisexuality or were unsure. Only 1% had discussed their sexuality with a parent.7

Sexual harassment

Jarman and Tennant's research found that the percentage of people who had experienced violence and harassment in Northern Ireland was higher than that indicated by comparable surveys in Britain and Ireland.2 The study, which surveyed 186 LGB people (67% male, 33% female), highlighted that:

• 82% had experienced harassment and 55% homophobic violence
• males were more likely than females to have suffered both harassment and violence
• the most common form of harassment was verbal abuse
• the most common forms of violence were being the target of a missile (35%), assault (30%), attempted assault (29%) and being spat at (18%).

Conclusion

The homophobic atmosphere and heterosexual bias that exist in Northern Ireland cause difficulties for young LGBT people coming to terms with their own sexuality.

References


**Other Northern Ireland factsheets**

- Abortion
- Relationships and sexuality education in schools
- Sexual health and people with learning disabilities
- Sex and the law
- Sexual behaviour and young people
- Sexually transmitted infections
- Teenage pregnancy
- The legal position regarding contraceptive advice and provision to young people

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